



To Grow Up, Apart by TheRealSokka

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To Grow Up, Apart

Growing Up/Apart

„What do you mean; you're moving?!"

Mike stared at the two people in front of him incredulously. It had taken only ten minutes from the surprise announcement via supercom that they were coming over, to El, Will and Jonathan standing at their front door, all three making such anxious faces that all of Mike's alarm bells had instantly started to chime. His first thought had been that it was a new Upside Down or Russian threat and he'd already been about to turn on his com again and call a Code Red.

But none of that, absolutely *nothing*, could have prepared him for the words that had actually just come out of his best friend's mouth.

Will wouldn't look at him. He was fiddling anxiously with the edge of the blanket still draped across the table from their last, disastrous D&D session. "It means we're moving. Mom's been planning it for a while."

"Far away." El added. She had sat down on the couch right next to Mike and leaned her head on his shoulder. She sounded tired, as she so often was since the bite.

Mike opened and closed his mouth, but no words were coming out. Surely this had to be a joke, right? But everything about their expressions said that it wasn't. And Will would never joke about something like this to begin with. "But – why? How? *Where?!'*"

"East Coast, I think." Will said, raising his head to meet Mike's eyes. His own were red and lined with dark circles; evidently he hadn't been sleeping well. "Maybe New York. Mom's got relatives there, they might help us out."

Mike could barely comprehend any of that. His mind jumped back to the first question: "But why?"

"It's to get away from everything. Make a fresh start." El answered. Her fingers, intertwined with his, tightened painfully. "Jim. He – he was the only reason she would have stayed. That's what Joyce said."

Mike gulped heavily. His mind was racing. "Fuck. So – Jonathan's up there telling my sister?"

"Yeah." Will nodded. All his gestures looked sluggish, numb. Which was exactly how Mike felt in the moment.

"Okay, so – so how do we talk your mom out of that?" he wanted to know. "El, have you tried talking to her? She has to listen to you. This is not what Hopper would have wanted, right?" He twisted his hands fretfully. "I mean, it's awful what happened, but she can't just move away against your will!"

Silence. They both just looked at him; brown eyes and hazel, both of which he used to be able to read so well turned unreadable. A dreadful sinking feeling manifested in Mike's stomach. "Guys?!"

"Mike." Will sighed. "It's not just her decision."

"We made it together." El said. "I wasn't sure, but Joyce is, and – and she knows."

"But...but..." Mike was too shocked to come up with anything. El was the most important person in his life, and the thought of losing her again paralyzed him. Then his mind took him further back, to the awful week where he would wake up every day knowing that his best friend wasn't there, that he wouldn't be at the bike racks to meet him today. Mike forcefully shook his head. Neither of those could happen again. Even if they only moved away, they might as well be completely gone. It just couldn't happen again.

"Mike?"

He looked up. Will's expression was sad. And sombre. He had looked like that a lot since last November – even though, as Mike now realized, he hadn't really paid attention to it. Why hadn't he? He used to notice everything about Will.

"Do you remember what you told me before I left? After the

campaign?"

His heart clenched painfully. Yes, of course he remembered, though he wished he didn't. "Will, look; that... I didn't mean..."

Will held up his hand, silencing him. "No, Mike; you told me to grow up. And you were right. I just – I guess I wanted things to be like before, you know?" He glanced at El and then quickly away again. "But they're not going to be."

El made a choked noise and pressed deeper into Mike's side. He instinctively slung an arm around her shoulders, feeling it shake with her unsteady breaths.

Will raised his arm like he wanted to touch her, froze and let it fall back down. "I'm sorry, El."

"S' okay." she whispered.

He took a deep breath and turned back to Mike. "It's just... you all got to grow up. You got to play and have girlfriends and run around saving the world. And I – I didn't get that. I-"

"You lost so much time." El spoke up. Her eyes fixed on Will. "Time you couldn't spend with them. That they stole from you; that you're not getting back."

"Yes." Will nodded to her in understanding. "And I – we can't move on. Can't grow up. Not here. We're not getting it back."

"So- so let's make up for that time!" Mike protested. He didn't like where this conversation was going. "Let's have another campaign, or a sleepover, or – I don't know, go camping or something." He leaned forward and placed a hand over his friend's twisting ones. "Just – don't leave. I'm sorry. Tell me what I can do and we'll do it."

Will looked at him sadly. He shook his head. "Mike, you don't get it."

"Then tell me!"

"You!" Will yelled back, and Mike flinched back in surprise. Will jumped to his feet and paced over to the TV. Then he paced right

back to stand in front of them, and Mike had rarely seen him look this upset. "It's you, and the others, and Hawkins, and the monsters, and... Everything is just so messed up. I'm messed up. Since the Demogorgon got me everything is just wrong! It's like everything moved on without me, and I feel like I'm trapped and if it weren't for you I would have run away a long time ago!"

Mike stared at his best friend. He tried to say something – anything – but no words left his mouth. He had had no idea. He hadn't thought it was this bad. Why had Will never told him that that was how he felt?

He only registered that El had stood up when she crossed over to Will. She placed both hands on his shaking shoulders. "Trapped." she echoed, and her voice was somehow brittle and strong at the same time. "Me too."

Mike stared at her, uncomprehending. "El..."

She turned around to him, and in that moment Mike would have given anything to make the sadness in her eyes disappear.

"Since Jim – since he's gone I only feel bad. Trapped. It's how he said." She exchanged another glance with Will. "You think going away will help?"

"I – I don't know, El. Maybe."

"Maybe?!" Mike jumped up now, too. This was all too much; too much all at once. "So you're just going to leave us all?! Me, Lucas, Dustin, Max; the Party? For a *maybe*?"

El's dark eyes found his and they were firm, but pleading for him to understand. "Maybe is more than never."

"That is – no!" Mike shook his head fervently. "We can make it better here. We're all sad for Hopper, but he'd want us to move on. We dealt with the lab, and with the Mind Flayer. Together."

"It's not the same." Will said quietly.

"Shut up and just listen!" Mike didn't mean for it to come out so

harshly, but he had to get this out, stop this from happening somehow. The words just continued to burst from his lips, like a current he couldn't stop. "Running away from this is not a solution! You need us now. You can't just abandon us like that. We have to stick together. What would have happened if we had just run when the Demogorgon got you, huh? Or the Mind Flayer? Should we have just let it take you? Would that have been better?"

"Mike!" El exclaimed.

Will only stared at him, eyes grown wide with shock. His lip started to tremble.

But for all that he didn't look away from him. A few years ago, a statement like that would have destroyed Mike's small, anxious best friend; it would have made him look at his feet and fold in on himself, trying to make himself as small as possible, the way he did when the bullies at school happened to notice him. But between that Will and the one now standing in Mike's basement lay six days spent in literal hell, and months of being possessed by a monster from another dimension. This one's eyes started to shine with a shimmer of tears, but he glared back at Mike defiantly.

Mike blinked. Suddenly he saw only his life-long best friend, close to tears. *What are you doing, Mike?* His anger evaporated. "Will..."

"Stop." Will whispered.

"I'm – I'm sorry. That was way out of line."

"Yes." Will breathed out harshly. "Yes, it was."

El's eyes found Mike's. Her hard expression softened. "You didn't mean it." she said.

"No. No." Why did he always have to mess up when he only wanted the people he cared most about in this world to stay? "I don't want you to go." he said the only thing he could think of, because it was true. And he had never meant anything more in his entire life.

"I don't want to either." El said. "I – we don't want to; we have to. We have to leave. Please, Mike, just understand that."

"I don't think the Upside Down would take me back, you know." Will said, every word a hurtful accusation puncturing Mike's chest. "Relationships have kind of soured since we shut it out twice. But maybe I should knock and ask, since *running away from this* is all I know how to do, right?"

"Stop it, Will! I didn't mean it like that and you know that! I care about you – and yeah, I know I'm really bad at showing that, but..."

"Yeah." Will huffed. "You care about El as well; what about her? Are you going to persuade her to stay? After everything those people did to her here? After Hopper..." His voice suddenly broke in the middle of the sentence and turned into a muted sob. The tears that had been pooling in his eyes finally escaped, running down his cheeks as he desperately tried to blink them away.

Working purely on instinct, Mike took a step towards him. He opened his arms and let Will fall into them, wrapping them around the shoulders of the smaller boy. They still fit perfectly into the hug, with Will still impossibly shorter than him. His friend sobbed into his shoulder and Mike ran a soothing hand down his back. He tried to make the hug say everything that he was so bad at putting into words: that he was his best friend no matter what; that he would give his own life before anything bad happened to Will again; and that he was so, so sorry. That most of all.

It dawned on him in that moment how long it was since they had been this close. That realization made him hug his friend all the tighter. They were going to move away, and he had wasted so much time.

El's arms wrapped around them, her head coming to rest on Mike's free shoulder. The fabric of his t-shirt there became wet, and Mike knew she was crying as well.

All this was about Hopper more than anything else, he realized. Mike had never really been that close to the chief, but his sudden death had left him as shaken as anyone else. Will had spent a lot more time with Hopper after his abduction, probably because the chief wanted to keep a closer eye on him, so it made sense that it would affect him more. El, however, had been hit harder than anyone. She had cried a

lot in the immediate aftermath of the battle, after she had gotten the terrible news. Then for days afterwards she had been almost robotic, staring into nothing more often than not with an empty expression. Then came a week where she was almost forcefully cheerful, followed by another where she again barely said a word. It didn't exactly make Mike *happy* to see her cry now, but it had to be an improvement over that.

"I didn't say goodbye." El whispered. "I didn't say goodbye."

"Ssh, it's okay." Mike told her, because he didn't know what else to say. "It's okay."

"Hopper went with me every time I had to go to the hospital." Will said from his place in the triple-hug. He was evidently making an effort to pull himself together; what he said was more for El's benefit than anyone else's. They had to make an odd sight; the three of them huddled so close together on the Wheeler's oversized couch. "For an entire year; every single time. He was always there. That's more than I can say about my own dad."

"I miss him!" El sobbed.

"Yeah. Yeah, me too."

She wiped at her eyes angrily. "I love him. Do you – do you think he knew?"

"I think he knew, El." Mike promised her. He might not have gotten Hopper all that well, but he wasn't blind, and that the chief cared for her was obvious to anyone who had eyes to see. "I *know* he knew."

El sniffled. "Thank you." she whispered, with that pure sincerity in the phrase that only she could do.

He didn't know how long they stayed like this; nobody came down to interrupt them and nobody watched the time. Knowing what he knew now, Mike didn't want to, either. Sad as it was, he didn't want this moment together to end.

Finally, Will pulled away. When Mike met his eyes, they had lost their angry look and only looked at him pleading. "Don't you see,

Mike? We have to get away from all this. This is what we'd have to deal with here every time we saw a fucking police car. Or anytime anybody mentioned anything about what happened. And it's much worse for mom." He gave a sad smile. "You and the Party are the only good thing about this place. And you're *good*, but it's just not enough. We couldn't be happy here. Not really."

"I – I want you to be happy." The full weight of the realization *They'll really be gone!* was starting to hit him, and it felt like a hammer to the chest. Suddenly it was difficult to breathe. Mike sank down on the couch, clutching his head in his hands. "But – what am I going to do without you?"

El pushed off a little to look at him. "We won't be gone completely." she promised. "We can write letters and – and we'll visit." She smiled. "Go shopping together; have sleepovers."

"It won't be the same."

"Hey." Will nudged him. "You'll be fine. You're the dungeon master, remember? You always pull through."

"You're good, Mike." added El, with all her beautiful simplicity.

Mike gave up on trying to hold back tears. "Okay." he managed. "Okay. But – I have to say this, alright? I am going to miss you, so much. Like, I can't begin to tell you how much I will miss you."

"Miss you, too." they both replied, as one. For normal people who hadn't been through what they all had been through, it might have been just a phrase, said in passing. But fortunately, they weren't normal.

Mike cleared his throat. "Okay. Just wanted to get that out there so there's no misunderstandings. Yeah. We'll make it work. Sure we will. But – but without the shopping."

El laughed. "Okay." she agreed. "No shopping together."

"But we can still have sleepovers, right?" Will wanted to know. If Mike hadn't known better, he would have almost thought his friend sounded teasing. "Or is that too childish; not grown up enough?"

"No." Mike said with determination. He swapped a smile with the two most important people in this world and felt a little bit better. "And if it is; screw growing up."